Notes from Chelouranya

A Conversation about Lithla

Play, or lithla*, is an important concept in Herthelan culture. All worldly activities are regarded as a reflection of the Divine Play—this includes, for example, academic pursuits, art, business, and politics, as well as sports and games. See Play, or Lithla in the Encyclopaedia Chelouranya.*

The following is taken from an online conversation on this subject:

Sushuri-chei: I wrote a bit about play. It was interesting because we had this discussion a little, didn't we?

Clovender-chei: Yes

Sushuri-chei: I don't know if what I wrote made it any clearer. I think we were fairly clear before but I may have dotted some t's. No—I mean crossed some i's. Oh well, you know.

Clovender-chei: Hee. I think I get the main idea. It's just that the word "play" means, to me, by definition, something not serious.

Sushuri-chei: Yes—one can see it that way. And I suppose the ambiguity is always and intentionally there. It is a little signal not to take "the things of this life and its acts and its purposes" TOO seriously. Which is not to say that Herthelani don't take them VERY seriously—we do. More seriously than West Telluriani in a lot of respects. But we don't forget. Or we shouldn't—and we believe we shouldn't.

Clovender-chei: Right.

Sushuri-chei: In other words, not playing one's best is not a virtue. And forgetting the ultimate nature of the game is also not a virtue.

Clovender-chei: I understand and agree with that last statement completely.

Sushuri-chei: Oh good. So—well, I understand the initial misunderstanding, but it makes sense now?

Clovender-chei: Hmm. I still don't understand why you express it the way you do.

Sushuri-chei: You mean in the piece I wrote today or before, or both?

Clovender-chei: Both.

Sushuri-chei: I think the point is that one could say that the "lithla" doctrine, except insofar as it is a way of expressing things, leaves the West Telluri (at least the relatively traditional one) theory of life unchanged. But I would say that isn't quite the case and that that is part of the basis of our work here. West Telluri tend to believe (and probably East Telluri too, though for different and better reasons) that a thing is "not a game" when and because it is established with a lot of material bulk. A real physical school—a department of education—a company within an economic system etc.

Clovender-chei: Okay, I see. That's not my objection, though.

Sushuri-chei: Now, in the Motherland we would tend to think similarly, but if we thought about it carefully we would have to drop the "because". Except insofar as the "because" means "because it is in the line of thamë which the whole society represents". Which actually is precisely what the West Telluri superstition in this matter is a vestige of. (Using the term super-stition in the etymological sense of something "standing-over" from a forgotten context.) SO—our mission, in part, is to establish just and regular Herthelan lithli for the diaspora in Telluria. And according to the doctrine of lithli, they are absolutely as valid as any other lithli, and more valid than any lithli not founded in the Golden Chain (or some equivalent). In fact it is only "by courtesy" that, say, a West Telluri school can be called a true lithla at all. By courtesy and by a certain vestigial thamë. But what was your objection?

Clovender-chei: That the word "game" makes it sound not serious. And I think it is serious, not because of the amount of matter involved, but because everything we do has meaning, whether good or bad.

Sushuri-chei: Yes, I would agree with that. And calling something "lithli" is not really the same as calling it "game" even though the words are in a sense equivalent. Because "lithli" always has the implication of "Divine Play" attached to it. And it certainly has never implied "something not to be taken seriously". Actually very much the reverse. And to say "you are playing games" can mean "you are not being serious". But no one would ever use "lithli" in that context. So maybe the real objection is that, to conform myself to English, I tend to say "game" more often than would really be the proper usage. It should really be "lithli" more of the time (in the context of such a discussion).

Clovender-chei: I don't think I would have the same objection to saying "everything is lithli" as "everything is a game".

Sushuri-chei: Ah—yes. Well, I think we are in agreement.

Clovender-chei: Hee. As usual, if we can figure out each other's words, we realize that we agree.

Sushuri-chei: Actually—now here is the interesting thing—"lithli" actually holds things to a stricter standard than either saying "game" or not saying either. Because if you call something "lithla" you immediately imply that it has a degree of ritual legitimacy. So it sets up a test that most West Telluri activity do not pass.

Clovender-chei: Right.

Sushuri-chei: And for example, anyone who said "I am going to play lithli on my Gamebaby" would get some very odd looks.

Clovender-chei: Heeee.

Sushuri-chei: That actually raises an interesting point, doesn't it? Can lightgames be part of lithli? And if not, why not—just because they are new? The three-legged race is a part of lithli! So it doesn't exactly have to be dignified.

Clovender-chei: Well, are we defining lithli as "ritually correct games"?

Sushuri-chei: All right—well, I think there are two definitions here—it CAN mean that. But very often I think, especially in modern times, the ritual legitimacy is more underpinned by its being the activity of a legitimately-constituted group. So, the three-legged race: I could see certain metaphysical meaning to that, but I am not sure I would want to claim it as a ritually correct game. I think it is part of lithli because it teaches balance, co-operation, etc. and is also part of the group's attempt to better itself in competition. So in principle I don't see that lightgames or other forms of simulation are inherently ruled out of lithli. It is just that going off to do something merely to amuse oneself is not how we use the word. Lithli seems to need some "ganbaru" element to be considered legitimate, I think.

Clovender-chei: Hmm.

Sushuri-chei: Even if its ritual legitimacy is "borrowed" from the proper constitution of the group rather than from its inherent ritual nature as an activity. I am groping a little here—trying to feel out the outer limits of lithli. There are other thoughts too. Are our paper dolls part of our lithli? Well, our lithli is VERY minimal right now—just a tiny shoot peeping above the soil. But I do think insofar as they help us to know ourselves and each other they are playing a role in our tiny, fragile proto-lithli. They create bonds—tiny ones—but is it not of many tiny strands that bonds are comprised?

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